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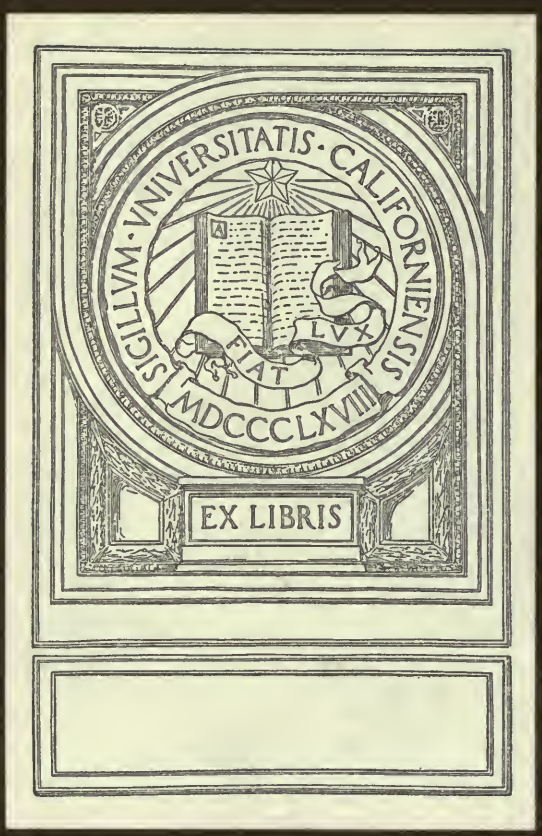
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A MONOGRAPH

ON

IVORY CARVING

IN THE

NORTH-WESTERN PROVINCES AND OUDH.

By L. M. STUBBS, I.C.S.

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IVORY CARVING . . . . .

N.-W. P. & OUDH . . . . . .

TO commence with an apology is to disarm criticism, though to follow this with an excuse is not calculated to create sympathy. At the same time, though the word ivory seems in many ways to possess peculiarly Indian associations, and ivory carving brings to memory Colonel Newcome's chessmen, this report is circumscribed by the geographical limits of the title.

The South Kensington collection possesses some most beautiful specimens of ivory work of various kinds, ranging from chessmen to inlaid furniture, but the closest survey will not reveal a single product of the North-Western Provinces, though the chessmen and carved divinities come from such widely distant places as Berhampur and Amritsar and the inlay work from Bombay and Vizagapatam.

The British Museum is no more productive, the art hand-books ignore these provinces, and, in short, anything in the way of extraneous information is very conspicuous by its absence.

This is the more extraordinary when one comes to consider that within the scope of this monograph come such ancient seats of civilization as Agra, Lucknow and Benares.

The ivory carving of Northern India is sufficiently well known, probably more so in England than in India; but the places of sale for this work are, if not perhaps always the places of manufacture, at any rate ordinarily considered such. Amritsar, Delhi, Murshidabad and Berhampur are perhaps the best known places for the purchase of ivory carving, and very beautiful work may be obtained there; the specimens of Berhampur work in the South Kensington Museum being probably the highest degree of perfection to which the art has attained, two pieces in particular, a set of chessmen and a group of Hindu divinities.

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Indian ivory, says the Encyclopædia Britannica, is not so well adapted for carving and turning purposes as is African or even the fossil Siberian, for various technical reasons into which it is not worth while to enter; but at the same time these specimens show to what a height the art might reach were it to receive due encouragement and a moderate amount of education; the former being much the more important condition, as anyone who has seen anything of the progress of Indian arts in various departments can readily understand.

Turning to the inquiry in these provinces, anyone who has had anything to do with a monograph of this kind will appreciate the difficulties of acquiring information when the subject is not a familiar one and such information as ought to be obtained is not ready to hand. Owing to the instructions received from Government the ordinary course was not followed; no circular with questions was sent out, and only likely districts were communicated with. The result of such inquiries may be imagined, and from district after district the same answer was received, most discouraging in its curt finality. The cause of this is however easily discoverable: the Deputy Collector or Tahsíldár found it difficult to connect the two ideas of the monograph and the ivory, and in many cases discovered the wrong word in the dictionary. However, the net result of such inquiries at the beginning was the conclusion that ivory carving was not an industry extensively followed in the North-Western Provinces, and this was not shaken by subsequent investigation.

This plan having been found unprofitable, personal inquiries yielded rather more result; but here too it was necessary to face a certain amount of difficulty. Such ivory workers as there are, are not men of means nor intelligence; and they are convinced, despite assurances, that no good can come of such paternal Government. Moreover, as will be seen from what follows, with the best will in the world they could tell but little since there is so little to tell.

This being so, it follows that such information as is contained in this paper is mainly derived from personal inquiries: and it would be

as well to begin by saying that though reluctantly compelled to differ from so many Collectors and Deputy Commissioners, I am still of the opinion that there is ivory carving in these provinces, and that it is capable of development.

Furthermore, in the teeth of denials, it is difficult to say definitely that the art or industry flourishes in any given place; but it is my opinion, submitted with due deference, that the facts I have elicited are typical, and that to a limited extent, strictly limited, the art of ivory carving is practised and may be discovered in the bazár of every considerable town in the provinces, and that in places where it does not exist it could easily be created and fostered if need were.

In some towns, Lucknow certainly, and I am inclined to think Benares and Agra, one can say more than this; and there are skilled workmen with definite traditions and real capabilities only limited by the paucity of demand, and kept in obscurity because the market for the higher class of their wares is foreign and, as a rule, reached through the middleman; that is to say, they are better than they themselves know and lose what chances they might have through lack of ambition and an ignorance of that glory of civilization—self-advertisement.

If then we may take Cawnpore as a typical instance of a place where ivory carving is followed to an extent created by the ordinary demand, that extent will be found to be very limited indeed.

In the Cawnpore bazár there are two or three small shopkeepers who earn a presumably precarious livelihood by the manufacture of bone instruments for the penboxes of the clerk or for the toilette boxes of the Hindu lady. (*Kalamdans* and *surmadanis*, together with the small pencils for the application of *surma.*)

They also make such small articles as paper-knives, combs, chessmen, and various articles in the ivory or bone fretwork which is so easily obtainable.

These men, as I have said, are merely bazár workers with no ambition beyond the earning of the necessary 4 annas a day, and, as a rule,

do not work in ivory unless they have a definite order to justify the outlay. The ordinary purchaser is quite content with his articles if they are made of bone, and in Cawnpore, as a matter of fact. I was told that the only customers for ivory work are the European residents. In proof of this I was shown a billiard ball and a chess pawn, neither in any way strikingly original in conception or execution, as may be imagined from the nature of the subject, the latter being only the most conventional form of an object which presents always and in other instances shows very great possibilities. In spite therefore of professions of ability to execute any commissions that might be given, judging from the specimens produced, I gathered that the performance would fall short of the promise. The bone articles were of the usual kind, and such as are easily obtainable in any bazár.

I was informed that there was no regular supply of ivory as there was no regular demand, but that it might be obtained in the bazár with a little difficulty at prices varying from 3 to 7 rupees a seer.

As to original sources of supply, my informant was exceedingly vague, but seemed to regard the Commissariat Office as being a likely finding place.

It goes without saying that these people have no stock and no ivory in the raw; their usual trade is in bone articles, but they are prepared to work in ivory if they are supplied with an order, and would prefer to be supplied also with the material.

They could not give me any information as to the places where I should be most likely to find a flourishing trade in ivory, but grasped at Lucknow as being a likely enough suggestion.

As I have said, I take Cawnpore to be a typical instance: no stock, moderate skill, but infinite willingness to satisfy any requirements. Not much to go upon, but still the indispensable foundations of an industry, even if only the bare necessaries.

As to the origin and history of such art as there was, I could gather no information at all. My informant's father and grandfather had done this work; had always done it, since the memory of man.

There were no models, no drawings; such things as were made, were made so because they agreed with a traditional pattern stored in the head of the maker; they had always been made so, how should they be made otherwise? The men I interviewed were Mussalmans, but the craft is apparently permissible to the Hindu; or my informant was ignorant of any prohibitive reason, though the inconvenience of bovine sanctity would necessarily limit the scope of their endeavours in bone.

Turning to Lucknow, I received through the Director of Land Records a list of articles made in ivory by people in Lucknow; small articles, for which there should be an immediate and moderately constant demand. The following is the list:—Combs, small toys, requisites for *kalamdans,* articles for applying *surma,* &c.; chessmen, cardcases, small models of buildings such as the Taj, paper-knives, paper-weights, handles for sticks, &c.; small boxes, scissors. I interviewed the man who made these things, and the results of the interview seem to be really all that can be described as worth knowing about the industry in our provinces. The man was as usual only a small dealer with no stock; his chief boast being that he was the Government Contractor for the supply of instruments for vaccination. He assured me that his entire stock consisted of a box a foot square containing small articles in bone and ivory of which the most elaborate was a walking-stick handle. This was priced at Rs. 15, and was a realistic if somewhat archaic representation of a tiger devouring a black buck This was distinctly the highest flight in art which I had seen and really possessed some merit. The rest of the stock in trade were the ordinary things—small knives, paper-knives, &c., made in the usual fretwork style, usually of bone, the most elaborate being the conventional woodpecker pattern in a paper-knife. He assured me that he worked by no pattern, but according to traditional ideas; that the only tools he employed were a knife and a file; and that the fish, tiger's head and birds with which his work was adorned were partly his ideas of nature and partly those which his father had copied before him. His ivory came from Bombay and Behar, or

wherever he could buy it most cheaply, the price varying according to quality from 6 to 10 rupees a seer.

Apart from his Government contract and occasional orders, his chief employers were middlemen, who sold his work in Delhi and elsewhere, and he could undertake any commission.

He volunteered to make me for Rs. 100 a complete set of chessmen in red and white, of the most elaborate description, with camels and elephants, and the kings sitting upon their thrones. Taking this into consideration, I am inclined to think, in spite of the Lucknow Museum authorities, who profess ignorance on the subject, that the really beautiful set now in the museum may come from the Lucknow workshops; and to support this theory, I am glad to be able to quote the opinion of Mr. Yusuf Ali, C. S., who purchased a similar set in Lucknow. This I have not been able to see, as he had parted with it; and owing to my having to leave India I have not been able to get a similar set made. This, however, is the description he gives of the set made for him, which corresponds very closely with that in the Lucknow Museum.

"Eight pawns about an inch long, dressed according to the carver's idea of old Indian infantry uniform, with shield on one arm and a lance poised in an angular direction in the other (to show the pawn's angular motion when it takes a piece); king sitting on a throne about an inch square; vizier with a stately beard on a somewhat lower 'masnad' than the king; two camel sowars (bishops); two cavalry sowars (knights); two elephant sowars (castles), one set white and the other red *(minakári)* work. Cost Rs. 40."

Mr. Yusuf Ali is inclined to believe that they make these sets also in Benares. I think it is very probable, though I have been unable to get any information on the subject. Judging from the price that Mr. Yusuf Ali paid, I should be inclined to think that his set was made in bone and not in ivory, but the result is much the same.

The ordinary chessmen are of course much more modest in appearance and frequently merely shapeless lumps; but these facts tend

to show that there is artistic capacity amongst the ivory workers which only needs encouragement and advertisement to be developed into work that is really worth study and inquiry. Moreover, I think there can be little doubt that this industry is not confined to Lucknow, but flourishes to about the same extent in Agra and Benares. Certainly I was told so by the Lucknow ivory worker, though from official sources the answer extracted was in the negative.

My informant told me that his father and grandfather had lived in Lucknow and had always carried on their craft; that they had their own traditional patterns; and that though they generally worked in bone, they were glad enough to take to ivory if they were given the opportunity; that they did a fair trade, though they paid no tax and that they had no stock.

He professed his ability to carve any figure, human or divine, though as portraiture did not come within his scope, the result must be mainly conventional.

As to methods of manufacture, he could or would give me little or no information. As I have said, he stated that his tools were a knife and a file; that he used no machine, and attached much importance apparently to the process of polishing, for which however he had no special recipe.

His orders for ivory work of course came mostly from the *Sahib log*, whether directly or indirectly, mostly the latter, as he worked without any ambition or any desire for personal notoriety.

This then is the picture of the state of the ivory carving industry in its most favourable aspect. Skilled workmanship on good models, only wanting encouragement from purchasers—and that not in the direction of education but merely in demand. It is unfortunate that there should be so few connoisseurs in native art in our provinces, and that a busy official life should necessitate neglect of such things, leaving the necessary patronage to the ignorant if greedy globetrotter; but this is probably inevitable; and even in this direction I am convinced that something might be done for the industry, were it a little better known.

In Benares I was told, by the native artists, there is carving carried on to a similar extent and of a like kind; but through official channels I learned that such as there is or was is derived from a workman imported in the last generation by the late Mahárája from Murshidabad. This would of course be carving of the Berhampur School. This man is dead and has left no successor; and though specimens of his workmanship and traces of his influence may be found, he worked only for the Mahárája and was his servant and not an independent tradesman. This is of course an exceptional case of the fostering of a foreign art by patronage; but I am inclined to believe, relying on native and trade information, as likely to be fully as accurate as that derived from official sources, that the industry flourishes in Benares to much the same extent as in Lucknow, and that the Benares like the Lucknow workmen find their market through the middlemen from Delhi and elsewhere.

The same remark exactly applies to Agra, where moreover may be found models of the 'Taj Mahal' carved in ivory. I am officially informed that such models of the Taj as are sold in Agra are imported from Delhi, but this merely illustrates my point in another direction, namely, that the carvers in Agra work for the Delhi middlemen, who on occasion bring back these wares to the place of their origin, merely an illustration of what frequently occurs in England and elsewhere in other and humbler industries.

This is the result of the inquiry with regard to the industry in its main aspect, but there are of course offshoots and exceptional by-products of a less elaborate description; for instance, I learn through Mr. Moreland that there are obtainable in Mussoorie small carvings in ivory of animals, apparently of a very crude description and not unlike the small silver figures which come from Muttra. I had hoped to be able to get some information on the subject from Saháranpur, but beyond the ordinary rough inlay work, which is found in better quality in Nagina, I have not met with any success.

In Nagina, I learn from the tahsíldár, there is an appreciable industry in ivory, but not of a high order of art. He enumerates

combs of the conventional kind, small boxes and knobs for walking-sticks, mostly in plain ivory, and says that for more elaborate articles and figures it is necessary to supply a model to copy.

On the other hand, ivory inlay work is carried on to a considerable extent, the ivory being set into ebony in floral patterns after the manner of the Agra marble inlay work. This is familiar enough, and though the better class of inlay work of course comes from Bombay, the ingeniously dovetailed ivory and ebony boxes may be also obtained here. The really fine work is mostly in perforated ivory of the ordinary kind obtainable in Lucknow, and is scarce, though combs are a speciality in Nagina. Chairs and teapoys are made in inlay work of the ordinary kind; ebony set with ivory in thin strips; but there is nothing elaborate in the patterns, which though good enough in themselves do not display anything strikingly original in design or conception. This is of course a separate branch of the ivory industry and can hardly be described as carving in any true sense of the word; but such as it is, it is too well known to need description as to manner and style, and quite sufficiently familiar to be independent of advertisement in the ordinary way, though undoubtedly it is capable of expansion under encouragement. Ivory in the raw is of course a more familiar commodity in Bijnor than in most other places; but that this does not necessarily imply that there is any particular demand for it, is illustrated by Mr. Cockburn, Deputy Collector in Kumaun, who informs me that the Rája of Kashipur and the Deputy Commissioner of Almora, wishing to dispose of their stores of ivory, were unable to find a market in the North-Western Provinces and had to turn to Amritsar and the Punjáb, where a demand for ivory always exists for the manufacture of ivory armlets for the women. One of the by-products of ivory is apparently ivory dust, which besides being used for polishing ivory carvings is also much esteemed as a medicinal preparation, which is believed to have an invigorating effect and is used as a tonic.

The price of ivory, according to Mr. Cockburn, varies more than seemed to be known to the Lucknow workmen, ranging from Rs. 2 to Rs. 20 a seer according to elasticity, size and tint.

Mr Cockburn's information is the more valuable in that he is himself an amateur, and I have learnt from him various details as to the tricks of the trade. The cheapest ivory is derived from young animals, and is brittle and of a yellow tint, so that it is of little use for carving purposes, the most valuable being of course tusks that have the greatest diameter and are of a white colour, such commanding a higher price because the armlets above mentioned can be turned out in one piece.

Ivory is preserved in India as elsewhere by being covered with a coating of melted wax, which prevents the loss of moisture.

It is unfortunate for the purposes of this monograph that so acute an observer as Mr. Cockburn should have been forced by the barrenness of these provinces in this respect to turn his attention to the products of Amritsar, but he confirms my impressions with regard to the industry generally in his remarks as to models.

He quotes as a familiar instance of ivory-carving the little model bullock carts which may be seen frequently at home, but these are of course not made in our provinces, even the carts themselves being of unfamiliar aspect. At the same time, he says "natives are strikingly conservative in their ideas of patterns as of other things, and their animals and figures, their inlaid boxes and perforated carvings, follow the same lines and repeat the old models which are familiar to us in wood, brass or stone". This is eminently true, and with the exception of the carved chessmen, the idea of which is of course not peculiar to the North-West, and is probably common to all parts of India, being as it is much the same in Amritsar, Berhampur and Bombay, and probably coming from some common model, I should say that ivory carving, in the North-West at any rate, has no peculiar models or ideas to distinguish it in any way from other branches of the carving industry.

To illustrate this remark, I would point out that the ivory inlay work, when it is anything more than ordinarily ambitious, is rather a repetition of the wire inlay or of the brass work of Moradabad; the animal figures are already familiar in brass or silver, and the perforated work may be seen in either silver or wood.

We may congratulate ourselves, at any rate, that so far our provinces in this direction have escaped the corrupting influence of European models, and in this we are more fortunate than the Punjáb, where they have begun to turn out combs and paper-knives in European patterns with Roman letters in quite the approved manner of Bellagio or Birmingham; and it is a melancholy prospect to think that in the fulness of time we may yet find sold on railway platforms paper-knives with the inscription—'A souvenir of Lucknow.'

Mr. Cockburn tells me that Benares, Lucknow, Bareilly, Moradabad and Saháranpur have considerable industries in bone working, more particularly camel-bones, and that they are always ready to work rather in ivory, when they can get or afford it, because it is easier to work and does not require bleaching.

This is again in accordance with my original surmise, but, so far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no distinctive product in any of these towns, and the same remarks apply to them as apply to Lucknow: their industry is latent rather than conspicuous, and their market is at Delhi and not in these provinces.

The native methods of workmanship are more crude than the European, though not less effectual; they use ivory dust rather than chalk for polishing, with ultimately the same result, and are apparently ignorant of the possibility of softening ivory with vinegar; but judging from the ivory carving of India generally outside these provinces, we would gather that, on the whole, the Hindu craftsman has very little to learn to his advantage that he could learn from the European, and it is to be feared that the introduction of improvements in method might mean a modification of patterns which would be anything but salutary.

To sum up the results of this inquiry such as they are. To begin with, I think there can be no doubt that the industry does exist and is capable of development or rather perhaps of expansion.

As to its existence and present state, the skill in craft and the will to work are there, but these are crippled by the poverty of resources and the absence of demand.

There is probably ivory enough in India itself, or easily obtainable from elsewhere, to satisfy an increased demand; but, on the other hand, when the demand is so small there is little or no encouragement to work without a definite order. The result of this is of course that the artists have little practice, and are unable to get more, because, possessing, as they do, no stock, they cannot advertise it sufficiently to make it known to those who might become patrons. It is probable that were India to produce a great artist in metal, a Benvenuto Cellini, he would die unhonoured and unsung, and much more so would this be the case in ivory carving, which is an art which gives scope rather for ingenuity than genius.

Moreover, when art reaches the level of genius it gets beyond the scope of a monograph, and we have to look rather at ivory carving as an industry on a level with that of the silver workers of Lucknow. Looking at it from this point of view, any development is more practical though perhaps less desirable. There is little or no native demand for ivory carving as there is little for silver work, and the market is generally found amongst Europeans.

The difficulty, if it is desired to encourage the industry, is to advertise it sufficiently to these patrons, or to provide encouragement enough to the ivory carvers, or to give them sufficient capital to enable them to keep a stock of ivory for exhibition purposes.

There is not the least probability that there will ever be any great development of the industry in the provinces, nor any great increase of demand at Dehli, nor would much be gained if there were.

Carvers in ivory are not a large class, nor would encouragement employ any great number of otherwise unemployed artists, and in any

other direction it is doubtful whether education would be anything but disastrous.

European models are certainly to be avoided, and were the example of the Mahárája of Benares to be followed and an artist imported from Murshidabad or Berhampur, it is difficult to see quite what would be gained. The natural result would be that he would introduce his foreign method of carving and foreign patterns, which might or might not oust the original designs, but in any case would not blend with or modify them.

Moreover, all this speculation means the treatment of ivory carving as an industry, which of course it really is not and can never be; and the attempted encouragement of an art on industrial lines, though possible and practicable in such directions as carpet-making, can never be safely applied to anything like ivory carving, which is by its nature more analogous in kind to working in the precious metals or to the painting of pictures. Looking at the subject in this way, any advertisement of the art must be regarded rather as in the interest of the patron than of the artist; and from this point of view there can be no doubt that were the art better known in the North-Western Provinces, both patron and art would be the richer for work that is even at present good in itself and is perhaps capable of improvement to the point at which improvement in ivory carving must stop.

This however is a question for the art critic and the connoisseur rather than for a provincial monograph, and opens a very wide question indeed. As Indian art in other directions stands by itself apart, so also does ivory carving, which presents such opposite poles in possibilities as the medieval carvings in the South Kensington Museum, the products of old France, and the marvels of ingenuity which characterise the art of Japan. Indian ivory carving stands midway between the two, and the direction its development must take is Indian and must follow the lines of Amritsar or Berhampur.

This being so, there can be little doubt that encouragement must be the result not of Governmental interference but of private

patronage, which is driven by fashion and caprice rather than by judgment and sound appreciation; and would, it is to be feared, naturally turn first to the better known and more advanced products of Bengal or Kashmir rather than be so original as to strike out an independent line for itself.

The natural channel of influence from Government would be by offering encouragement through museums of local industries, such as that at Lucknow, and it is possible that something may yet be done in this direction; though here again it is doubtful whether India is likely to be much influenced by a local exhibition, or her ancient arts modified with any very satisfactory result.

The conclusion may be a little depressing, but though little in the way of information has resulted from investigation, the object of the monograph will have been amply served if any interest has been aroused in the existence of an art which is at present apparently far too little recognised.

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